



Simona Bertacco (ed.), *Language and Translation in Postcolonial Literature*

(Abingdon, Routledge, 2014, 248 pp. ISBN 978-0415656047)

Nicoletta Vallorani

Language and Translation in Postcolonial Literatures starts from silence, or better, develops on the basis of Ashcroft's "poetic idea of the translation as a way of bridging the silence". This is particularly true in the postcolonial context; there, a successful theory of translation cannot ignore the relevance of language and must be grounded in the awareness that postcolonial writers often hold "language with a vengeance" whose ownership entails the privilege of self-representation. In his seminal essay, Ashcroft also shortly recapitulates on some landmarks on the theory of translation, reminding, after Rushdie, that

the word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always get lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.

In outlining the condition of postcolonial writers, Ashcroft emphasises their problematic necessity of being unfaithful to two languages, an experience that is to be



taken into account, however complex this may be, in the process of translating the book in a third language.

Still it is true that, "A language is what you make of it": meaningfully Zabus quotes this statement by Breyten Breitenbach in her surprisingly rich essay "Writing with an Accent". Zabus focuses on the phenomenon of "indigenization" – a definition she introduces while examining the process of cultural transmission in African contexts through several textual examples - and she points out that in most cases African literary texts may prove untranslatable. This, according to Zabus, calls for a multilingual and comparative approach to postcolonial textualities, however complex the operation may prove..

Quite a similar position is taken by Cimarosti, who goes back to Glissant's statement that "Forced poetics exists where a need for expression confronts an inability to achieve expression. It can happen that this confrontation is fixed in an opposition between the content to be expressed and the language suggested or imposed". In her passionate and lucid essay, focused on Walcott's musical play *Ti-Jean and his Brothers* and its lyrical version *Moon-Child*, Cimarosti puts into question the traditional ways of conceiving language and literature in relation with translation, considering them in the light the postcolonial critique to date. Her basic point is that translation today has to account for the way English is remoulded in the literatures of the ex-colonies and this remoulding is to be considered as a creative response to the colonial diatribes dominating discourse that run the literary market.

Part I of the volume is concluded by the essay of Bertacco, previously a researcher at the University of Milan and now a professor at the University of Louisville (USA), that closes the circle identifying the way in which, in the poetics of some postcolonial texts, the translation is given a creative role that is not to be underestimated. Her original and interesting approach shows how the act of translation impacts on writing and reading practices, resulting in the phenomenon of a "translational poetics" that is well developed through a close reading of Tomson Highway's and Dionne Brand's works. And she concludes her analysis asking a basic question: to which extent the poetics of the texts is affected by their bilingual or multilingual nature? The issue is perfectly congruent with the aim of the volume's first section, openly meant at working with multilingual textualities in order to provide effective as well as original methodological tools to whoever approaches a postcolonial literary text with a view to its translation.

Bertacco, who is also the editor of the volume, divides it into 4 parts. After the section entitled "Translation Texts" (that has been already focused on), Part II develops around the purpose of considering some specific contexts that are marked by the need of living and learning in translation as a rule of everyday life: this condition is to be considered as "the 'pre-text' – as what comes *before* the text – of innovative forms of cultural engagement and performance".



Within this theoretical frame, Sommer & Mohamed analyse a pilot-arts-based literature program offered in a high school in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, focusing on multilingual practices and showing how the creative-pedagogy project called Pre-Text and devised at Harvard University may be applied to the postcolonial condition. Sommer & Mohamed highlight the connections between learning, making and citizenship also showing how an arts-based pedagogy can stimulate new forms of civic engagement.

Simon, in her turn, focuses on the urban context, defining the two possible ways of understanding “the ‘postcolonial city’: the first and the most common one refers to the cities of former colonial possessions that were once physically occupied by the colonizer and bear the architectural and topographical marks of this period. The less common understanding refers to former imperial capitals like London and Paris, which today have in turn been marked by the presence of intense migration from east to west”. Her reflections on Calcutta and Montreal and on the many ways in which identity and language interact in these two contexts aim at proposing a methodological model that goes beyond the binary understanding of the opposition Native/Colonizer.

Moving towards Europe, Stephanides starts from Benjamin’s concept of translation as transmission of cultural memory and compares the Mediterranean and the Caribbean seas, drawing on his autobiographic experience (he was born in Cyprus), and eventually proving that translation may be seen as an epistemological framework to effectively interpret the world we live in.

Finally, Philip’s essay focuses on the context of Malaysia, a multicultural, multiracial and multilingual country, to show how language and culture can be related as to articulate the meaning of national and ethnic identity. That main point is related to the impossibility to consider English as a language “belonging” to a specific ethnic category: in the postcolonial world, this marks the choice of using English as less culturally and politically loaded than the use of other national languages. “Language and culture – Philip concludes – are interlinked in a variety of complex ways that severely complicate issues of national identity, ethnic identity, and the sense of belonging within and ownership of the nation”.

Part III, “Contexts of Translation”, develops around the many ways in which the translation of postcolonial literature has an impact on the national tradition, in terms of both space and time. In the first essay in this section, M. Keown chooses to concentrate on the issue of translation in three different Aotearoa/New Zealand-based translators (Jean Anderson, Raylene Ramsay, and Debora Walker-Morrison) working on the translation of Kanak/New Caledonian and Ma’ohi/French Polynesian. In their notes on the act of translating, all the three of them seem to be very clear on the complexity of ethical and political issues to be taken into account when working on the languages of these postcolonial cultures, and they qualify their theory of translation as “resistant” (Anderson) and “thick” (Ramsay and Walker-Morrison) , in order “to convey to the



uninitiated Anglophone reader some sense of the historico-cultural context that surrounds the text they translate”.

Quite interestingly, in the second essay, Cavagnoli mentions Seamus Heaney’s very famous statement on his fellow countryman James Joyce and his use of English – emphasizing Joyce’s ability to transform an “imperial humiliation” into a “native weapon” – then proceeding to demonstrate the way in which the language of the colonized bears the marks of the past of subjugation and oppression is to be taken into account when trying to reproduce the voice of the oppressed in another language. “[T]he desire for creativity” that opens Cavagnoli’s analysis and that must also be related to Cavagnoli’s double talent (as a translator and a novelist) is a necessity for whoever tries to translate the condition of inbetweenness, homelessness, not belonging that mark the transnational/translational spaces.

Rizzardi provides a wider theoretical frame to Kwan and Cavagnoli’s positions, pointing out the “necessity to reconceptualise translation in the postcolonial field in terms of exchange and relation”. Rizzardi’s recapitulation of a whole set of familiar tendencies in the traditional ways of translating postcolonial texts (‘rationalization’, ‘clarification’, ‘ennoblement’ and ‘exoticisation’ of the vernacular) anticipates and prepare the proposal of a translation that is more attentive to the text, to its rhythms, features, and internal symmetries or asymmetries as an antidote to the ‘deforming’ tendencies that characterized past attitudes to translation”.

PART V concludes the volume, opening a window on globalization and the new digital ecology and tries to define the role of language in postcolonial culture within this frame of development. In the first of the two essays composing this section, Nien-Ming Ch’ien points out the still problematic relationship between the endless possibility to cross borders and remove cultural and national belonging in the virtual world and the persistence of differences in the real postcolonial contexts. This persistence is not to be ignored: technology is a Janus-faced tool and, as Nien-Ming Ch’ien maintains, “A borderless world does not alter the fact that much culture is local and physical – and exists despite and sometimes in defiance of borders and borderlessness”.

Cronin instead posits the question of “the production and accessibility of postcolonial literatures in translation addressing the nature of the digital contexts in which they are made available”. Through a very tight line of reasoning, he relates the challenge of postcolonial literatures in translation to the necessity to understand “how the global, digital community of writers and readers of translated literatures will enable or will hinder the emergence of new forms of expression”.

On the whole, the volume leaves an open window on the future while suggesting that, as Bertacco specifies in her Introduction, “a single-language approach to postcolonialism is unfaithful to one of the basic constituencies of the postcolonial world – its multilingualism”. Drawing on the relationships between learning, making, and citizenship, Bertacco is very clear on the double purpose marking the volume: the



need to “return to a closer attention to the formal – and linguistic *in primis* – features of the postcolonial literary text in order to address its multilingual concerns” and the desire to showcase “a critical praxis able to relate those aesthetic features to real-world issues, and it does so by focussing on language, the most pervasive, yet invisible element in our lives”. Within this frame, the book is dedicated to the memory of Barbara Godard, whose teachings were the ground on which the project was built.

Nicoletta Vallorani

Università degli Studi di Milano

nicoletta.vallorani@unimi.it